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ABSTRACT

There are a variety of important policy issues concerning the movement of students among higher education institutions. This report is concerned with the transfer student's capability to succeed at the new institution. In encouraging flexible movement of students among institutions, one must find equitable ways to maintain standards. The grade-point average is too much of a differential to be the only factor in deciding a student's ability to transfer. The emphasis of this paper is on the fact that there are different ways to approach the problem of transfer standards and that various mechanisms may be appropriate for various institutions and for different types of transfer students. Four general mechanisms are described to monitor the movement of transfer students in ways that are reasonable from the standpoint of the student, the institution, and the public. They are: adjusted grade, standardized examinations, competency standards, and accreditation. The author then articulates the varieties of transfer: articulated vertical transfer, traditional horizontal transfer, nontraditional transfer, reverse transfer, open-door transfer, double reverse transfer, and vocational transfer. The conclusion suggests the need for exemplary program models concerning transfer students. (Author/PG)

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TRANSFER STANDARDS AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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Topic: Academic Aptitude

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There are a variety of important policy issues concerning the movement of students among higher institutions. We are here concerned with only one of these issues -- the fact that student bodies at different institutions vary greatly in academic ability and the complications such variations create when students move from one college to another.

To frame the problem quite clearly, it is useful to state two assumptions that are at slight variance with the Furniss-Martin report, which these background papers are intended to extend. First, it seems useful to distinguish between two notions of "ability": (a) the transfer student's capability to succeed at the new institution, and (b) the student's prior academic preparation. We are concerned here with the former interpretation which is associated with such ideas as academic aptitude, the distribution of talent, and grading variations. The latter interpretation, while obviously related, involves a separable set of issues concerning especially curriculum, articulation, and credit policy. These latter issues seem more readily related to the substance of education, while this paper examines ability as it pertains to transfer admission standards.

As a second distinction, we are not so much concerned here with the question of whether an institution formally follows an open or a closed admissions policy, but rather with the more critical fact of substantial

de facto differences in ability among student bodies and resulting wide differences in academic standards across institutions. There are "open door" community colleges with some exceptionally selective programs; there are "selective" liberal arts colleges that would think twice before turning down an applicant. The important fact is that student bodies vary greatly in ability regardless of formal admission policy. Rational institutional policy regarding movement of transfer students must take that variation into proper account if higher education as a whole is to serve the public interest.

Figure 1 provides a good illustration of such variability. Each bar in this figure illustrates the range of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores for entering students in one of 27 public higher institutions in a single state. The bars representing individual institutions are arranged in descending order according to average SAT score in order to illustrate the very substantial differences among institutions. For example, there is virtually no score overlap between the three highest and the three lowest institutions. That is, a student at the 10th percentile of the SAT distribution in Institution B scores substantially higher than a student at the 90th percentile of the SAT distribution in Institution Y. This particular pair of institutions provides an extreme comparison, but it is obvious that random transfer of students among these institutions would frequently result in students meeting very different intellectual competition than that to which they had been accustomed.

There are, of course, many ways to define academic ability, but Figure 1 represents more than an arbitrary choice of data that happen to

be available. All tests of this character are heavily saturated with verbal and quantitative ability, and decades of research show that college grades are more dependent upon those mental abilities than any others we have been able to identify.

The data of Figure 1 provide a convenient illustration because they include all public institutions within the state. Corresponding data from other states might indicate somewhat higher or lower test scores, but there is no reason to believe that there would be less variation among institutions. Wide differences in the scholastic aptitude of students at different colleges have been discussed in detail (Darley, 1962) and are routinely documented in college guides (Dillenbeck and Wetzel, 1972; Furniss, 1973). We can say further that such institutional differences are an accepted part of American higher education. Two connected lines of reasoning underlie this meritocratic stratification.

One is the fact of wide variation in the supply of academic talent among college-going students; another is the generally accepted assumption that it is desirable to specialize education and training at levels appropriate to individual capabilities and to the demands of different lines of work. Thus, it is argued that society needs an hierarchical system of advanced training to insure multiple levels of access for individuals of different ability and to facilitate efficient and effective education through some degree of specialization in rough accord with ability level. The need for an hierarchical system is commonly related to the need for an open, yet striving and competitive, society (Glazer, 1970).

But it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain or justify meritocratic stratification in higher education. Given the desirability of

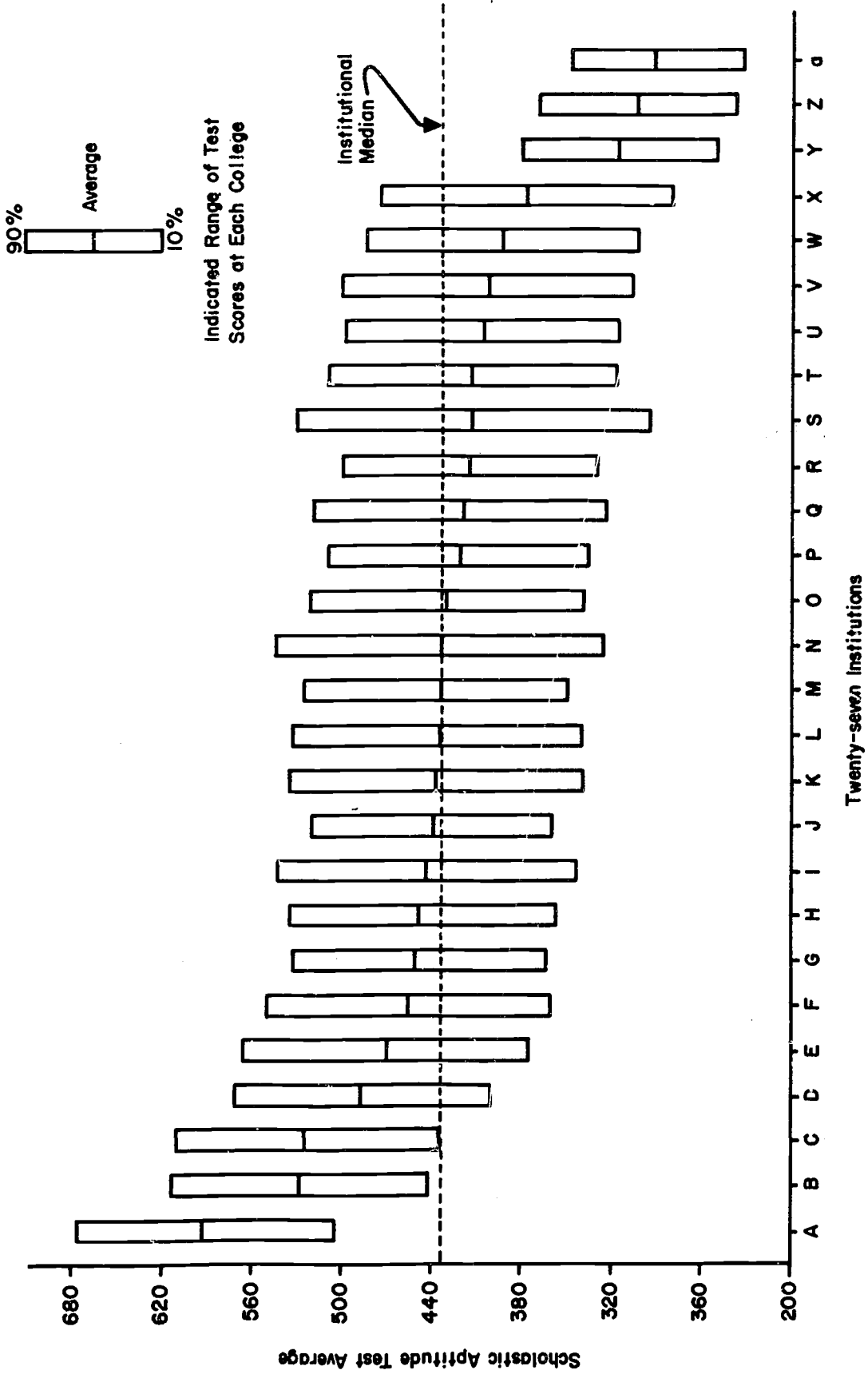


Figure 1. Range of SAT scores for incoming freshmen at each of 27 public colleges in a single state (Adapted from Pounds, et al., 1970)

differential selectivity based upon aptitude, as stated in the Furniss-Martin paper, the important question is how to maintain an hierarchical system that respects quality without building in rigidity, either in the form of exclusionary elitism or obfuscating procedures. In other words, what basic principles are important to the public interest in governing the movement of transfers among various student bodies that differ substantially in ability?

One guiding principle is to establish policies and procedures that maintain standards of competency appropriate to various programs and institutions that serve different purposes. Clear standards that are attainable by those willing to do the necessary work provide incentive and a sense of personal accomplishment. As such, standards of competency serve to enhance the effectiveness of the educational system.

It is equally important to maintain flexible access to and within the educational system. Aside from the fact two-year college students must transfer if they wish to continue their education, there are a variety of students who find it necessary or desirable to move from one institution to another — a developing young person with a changing career interest, an adult some years removed from earlier college work, an involuntary transient in today's mobile society, or a persistent student seeking a second chance in what he or she hopes will be a more appropriate academic climate. In short, the academic experience must be transportable and provide a sense of options in addition to prescriptions.

It is also important to maintain a sense of equity. If transfer admissions policies and procedures are to be fair and evenhanded, they must not subject students to undue hardship just because the student finds it

necessary to change institutions. Inequities can easily arise when transfer students are required to meet the idiosyncratic standards and requirements of one institution, simply because they are slightly different from those of another. In general, multiple routes to an identical academic credential should not incorporate intrinsic disadvantages to some students in the form of more demanding requirements or artificial hurdles.

Maintaining Transfer Standards

In looking for equitable ways to maintain standards while encouraging flexible movement of students among institutions, one looks naturally to the college grade point average, the readily available currency of higher education. But it is well known that the currency is not a common currency, and that a "B" at one institution is not always equal to a "B" at another institution. This is necessarily so in an hierarchical educational system. Two institutions that have student bodies of widely differing average ability cannot easily maintain comparable grading standards. If they tried to do so, grading would be entirely too easy at the selective institution, and far too many would flunk out of the institution with less able students.

This situation is well illustrated by the data in Figure 2. The freshman average grade and the SAT average score are shown here for entering students in the same 27 institutions represented in Figure 1. Since both coordinates are comparably scaled to system-wide statistics, the figure illustrates fairly accurately the extent to which institutions vary with respect to average freshman grade and average SAT score. As can be seen, these 27 student bodies differ substantially with respect to scholastic aptitude, but there is considerably less variation in the average freshman grade assigned by the faculties. Furthermore, the figure indicates almost no relationship between the average grade assigned and the average scholastic ability across institutions, even though a substantial relationship between grades and aptitude is reported within these same institutions. In other words, individual faculties grade mostly within the normative

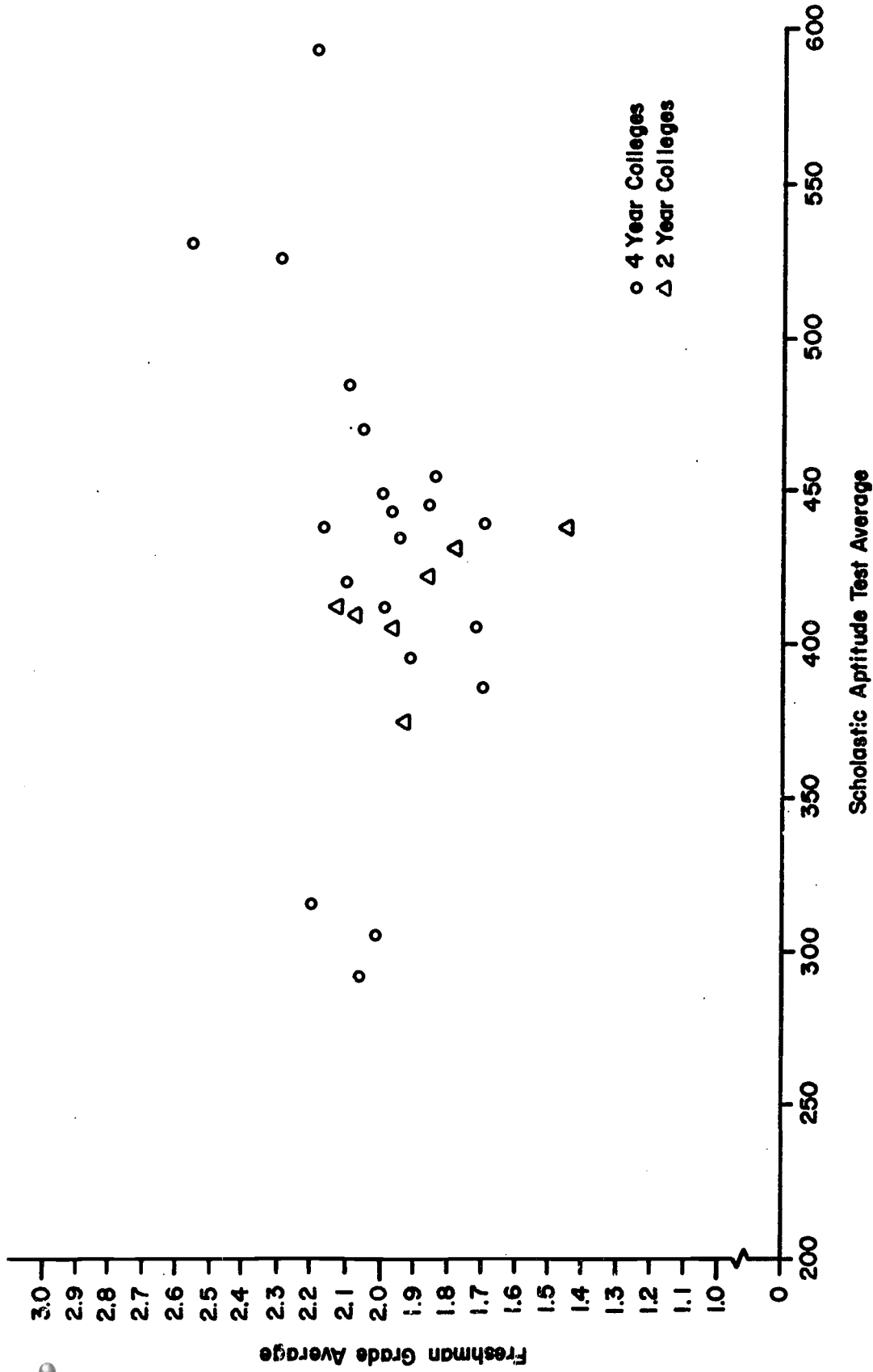


Figure 2. Average SAT scores and average freshman grades at each of 27 public colleges in a single state (Adapted from Pounds, et al., 1970)

framework of their own institution regardless of the ability level of their students.

Due to this set of circumstances one would expect that a student moving from an institution with predominantly low ability students to one with students of much higher caliber would suffer a substantial drop in his grade point average after transfer. The figure suggests that there are probably characteristic grade differentials between pairs of institutions, the direction and magnitude depending largely upon the scholastic ability of the student bodies and the grading habits of the respective faculties.

Of course, there is considerable evidence of such grading differentials and they come in several varieties. Knoell and Medsker (1965) have documented characteristic grading differentials from two-year colleges to various types of four-year institutions. For example, if one takes into account the typical increase in grades from the lower to the upper division for native students, and the typical decrement in grades over the same span for transfer students, the following net differentials (from two-year institutions) can be calculated from the Knoell-Medsker study:

Major State Universities	-.48
Teachers Colleges	-.10
Other State Universities	-.32
Private Universities	-.33
Technical Institutions	-.50

In each case, the differential indicates a lower grade on the average after transfer. Transfer students typically make somewhat higher grades

after their first term in the upper division. Some writers have referred to this gain as a recovery from "transfer shock," though it may be largely attributable to the fact that seniors make somewhat higher grades than juniors at most institutions. Along similar lines, Kuznik, et al., (1973) have documented positive differentials for reverse transfers from four-year to two-year institutions.

As one gets more specific with respect to the particular type of transfer, grade differentials become more diverse. One study, for example (Willingham, 1963), reported grade differentials ranging from .30 to -1.40 associated with the individual institutions from which students transferred. In that same study, even larger grade differentials were found for courses in different areas. For example, a group of transfers from one institution consistently made one letter grade higher in verbal courses like English and history, while students from another institution consistently made two letter grades lower in quantitative courses such as mathematics and science. Furthermore, it is widely known but seldom documented that grading standards vary considerably among different units in the same university.

These various types of differentials contribute their own ambiguity to the interpretation of a college grade average. On top of the grade differential problem is the fact that innovations in grading and nontraditional forms of education continue to undermine what stability and common currency there may be represented in a college grade transcript. Given these various problems, what are the alternate means for maintaining academic standards among institutions? How can the movement of transfer students be monitored in ways that are reasonable from the standpoint of the student, the institution, and the public at large? We can describe four general mechanisms;

their applicability differs somewhat, depending upon the type of transfer and the situation. First we shall consider the methods in the abstract, then consider their applicability in different situations.

Adjusted Grade. The simplest approach to determining whether a student has the ability to succeed after transfer is to establish what grade differential is characteristic of the prior institution. Thus, if transfer students from the given institution typically make one-half letter grade lower after transfer, then the grade average of students from that institution can be adjusted by that amount in order to put applicants from different institutions on a comparable footing for admission purposes. This procedure depends upon there being a substantial number of transfer students from the institutions in question so that a reliable grade differential can be established. It also depends upon a demonstrated relationship between prior grade and grade after transfer. In short, if there are a substantial number of students transferring from college "A" to college "B," it is a routine (if not entirely accurate) procedure to determine whether a given grade point average from the previous college gives reasonable assurance of success after transfer.

Standardized Examination. Surprisingly, there is only limited information concerning the correlation between grades prior to transfer and grades after transfer. In some cases the correlation is substantial; in other cases, pre-transfer and post-transfer grades are very poorly related (e.g., see Lunneborg and Lunneborg, 1967; Wray and Leischuck, 1971). Part of the reason that previous grades are often not a reliable indicator is the fact that transfers come from many different institutions, no one of which is represented by a

large enough group to establish reliable grade differentials. In such situations, a straightforward solution is to use a standardized examination in addition to previous grades in order to compensate for the discrepancies often inherent in college records from different institutions. Any of a variety of local or national admissions tests (either aptitude or achievement) can serve this purpose. This method is a direct corollary to the problem of admitting first-time freshmen from a variety of secondary schools with different grading standards.

Competency Standards. There is another approach which depends upon standardized tests but is very different from the one just described. Increasing emphasis upon the notion of competency-based education suggests that all students moving from the lower to the upper division might be held to an established set of competency standards that represent minimum outcomes of the first two years of college. When all rising juniors within a system (including native students in four-year institutions) are required to meet such competency standards, the test becomes not so much a transfer test, but rather a means of maintaining educational accountability for all students and faculties within the system.

This mechanism includes at least the following steps: (1) establishment of a core curriculum within a system; (2) designation of minimum competencies to result from general education in the lower division; (3) development of common examinations to measure such outcomes; (4) requiring all students to pass these examinations prior to classification as a junior. Rentz (1970) describes a program in the University System of Georgia that has proceeded partially through steps 2 and 3. At this time, all rising juniors in public institutions in Georgia must take and eventually pass minimum competency

tests in English composition and reading comprehension. The College Level Examination Program (CLEP) represents a similar means of establishing such standards in a national or local framework.

Accreditation. Movement of transfer students can also be governed through legislated agreements that do not depend upon evidence regarding the ability of individual students. In the context of articulated system planning, some states have moved to the position that acquiring the AA degree is satisfactory evidence of completion of general education requirements, and that such students are automatically admissible to the upper division of senior institutions (see Kintzer, 1973). This is basically the same mechanism that has been used historically in some states to guarantee admission to any high school graduate to the state higher institutions. The actual result — sometimes called the revolving door — is to postpone the imposition of academic standards until after students are admitted. The advantages of the system are the apparent ease with which students move from one level of education to the next. The disadvantages are subtle but endemic. Educational continuity becomes increasingly difficult to maintain for students with diverse preparation, and many students who are freely admitted are just as freely flunked out. Knoell and Medsker (1965) cited substantial transfer failure rates in some institutions as support for their argument for the use of grade differentials in counseling students toward colleges where they have a reasonable chance of success.

Varieties of Transfer

Which mechanism is most appropriate for monitoring transfer admission standards depends upon the nature of the transfer situation. There are many

ways to categorize the wide variety of transfer students, but it is useful to distinguish at least seven types of transfers. Judging from gross national statistics on transfers to all institutions (Rice and Mason, 1965; Wade, 1970) and sample statistics on more detailed transfer patterns (Willingham and Findikyan, 1969), we can estimate roughly that there are now likely to be some 600,000 transfers annually.

It is possible to make only very crude estimates of the gross number of students moving among different types of institutions. Statewide data from Illinois and North Carolina (Illinois Council on Articulation, 1971; Davis and Balfour, 1973) indicate that there is a substantial number of reverse transfers from four- to two-year institutions, and a much smaller number of transfers among two-year institutions. Other estimates suggest that somewhat more than 50% of all students transferring from four-year institutions come from two-year colleges (Sandeem and Goodale, 1972; Willingham, 1972). The best current guess is that the gross movement of transfer students among two- and four-year institutions is somewhat like that represented in Figure 3. In the following paragraphs we consider briefly the salient characteristics of these seven types of transfer and speculate on the most appropriate mechanisms for monitoring transfer admission standards in each case.

1. Articulated Vertical Transfer. Probably the largest single group of transfers is that group of students moving directly from junior college transfer programs to four-year institutions. This type of transfer is, of course, knowingly created by the development of the community college model of statewide higher education. In this case, "articulation" means

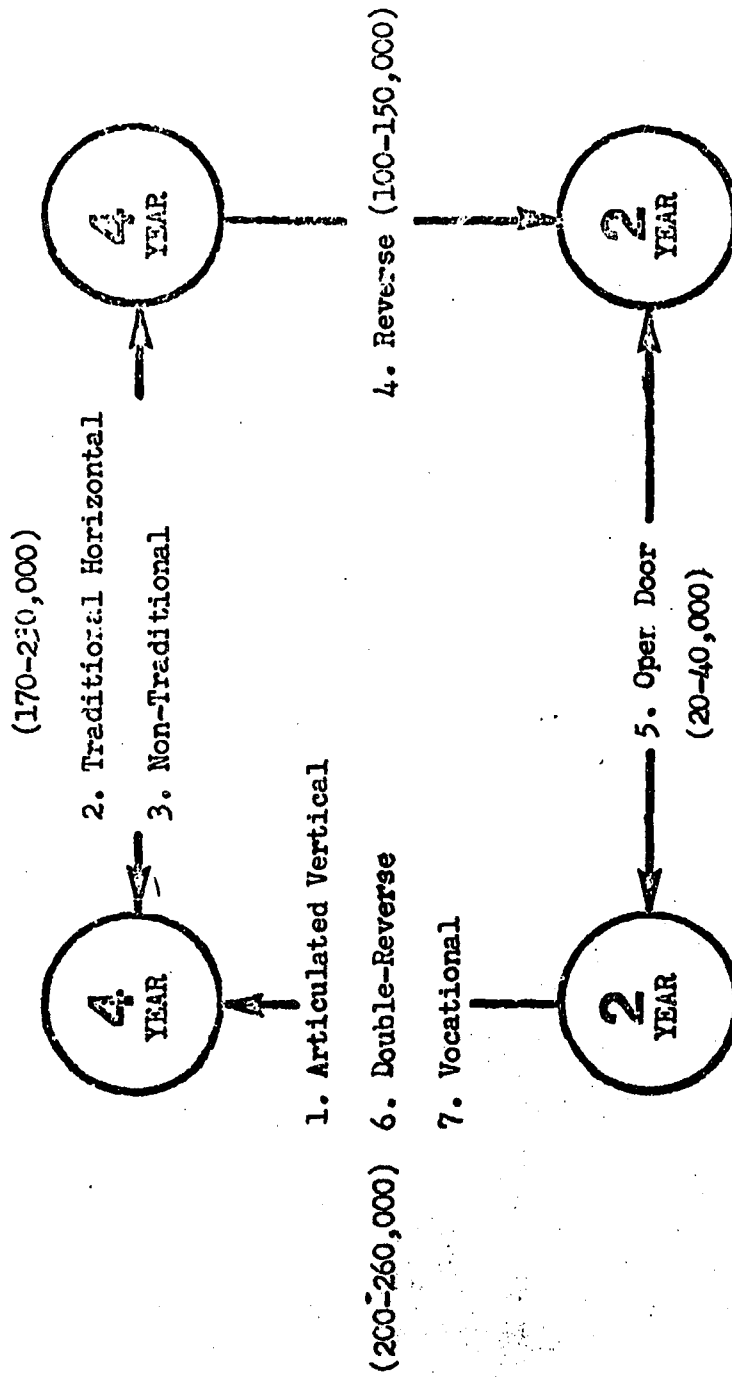


Figure 3. Seven types of transfer flow among two- and four-year institutions (including rough estimates of the number of students involved each year)

the development of parallel curricula in two- and four-year colleges and routine procedures for moving students from the lower to the upper division, even though separate campuses are involved. Knoell and Medsker's (1964a, 1964b, 1965) exhaustive study of this form of transfer resulted in articulation guidelines and detailed recommendations concerning transfer admission standards (Joint Committee, 1966). Those recommendations are still quite valid, though they have been disregarded by too many institutions.

Knoell and Medsker urged that the previous college record, adjusted for grade differentials, is the straightforward and preferred means of judging the ability of community college transfer students to succeed in the upper division. Nothing has happened in the past 10 years to change that conclusion. In actual practice the best procedure in a state system is probably to apply an overall differential for two-year students by requiring a minimum grade average for transfer that is somewhat above 2.0 if there is a consistent negative grade differential for such transfers. Routinely disseminated information concerning grade differentials among particular pairs of institutions then becomes a means of counseling students and keeping grading patterns roughly in line.

There has been some cautious experimentation with the notion of admission by blanket accreditation of the AA degree and, as previously mentioned, by the establishment of minimum standards of competency for all students moving from the lower to the upper division. There is wide agreement, however, that "admission tests" should not be imposed upon students moving from lower to upper division within an articulated system. Requiring all rising juniors to meet minimum standards of competency has more educational justification and

more equity than requiring community college students alone to demonstrate their achievement.

2. Traditional Horizontal Transfer. At one time, this form of transfer accounted for essentially all movement of undergraduate students among institutions. It still represents perhaps one fourth of the total, but there are many forms of traditional transfer. Students move from one four-year institution to another for a wide variety of reasons, including family migration, change in educational plans, or simply dissatisfaction with the originally chosen institution. Because there are typically only a few transfers from one particular four-year institution to another, it is often difficult to judge the likelihood that a given student record suggests success after transfer. Consequently, it is fairly common for colleges to use some sort of standardized examination in conjunction with the previous college average as an improved means of making transfer admissions decisions. Transfer among four-year institutions is often such an individual matter that using a test becomes the simple solution.

One pervasive problem in the traditional transfer of students among senior colleges has been the prestige hang-up that has prevented moderately selective colleges from admitting students who are having academic difficulty at more selective institutions. A standardized test can demonstrate that many such students are bright and quite capable of succeeding at a less rigorous institution. A few years ago, great numbers of such students were being rejected (Willingham and Findikyan, 1969). Perhaps the current buyer's market will encourage some adjustments that will benefit both students and institutions.

3. Nontraditional Transfer. There are an increasing number of transfers among four-year institutions that fall into a somewhat different category. These include adults who may not have attended college for some years, students with unusual records including heavy representation of odd grades or credit awards, and transfers from innovative programs that do not conform with familiar lower division course work. In such instances, the level of academic accomplishment and potential may not be apparent from available records. There may often be a need for more substantive assessment to be sure that the student has the background to handle the degree program to which he has applied and to be certain that all valid accomplishments are recognized. In admitting such students it may be impossible to avoid the related issue of crediting prior work. In the case of many nontraditional students it may thus be advisable to require a college-level examination like CLEP to serve not only as a basis for judging admissibility, but also as a general guideline to estimate where the student should pick up his undergraduate education.

4. Reverse Transfer. The only available statistics on reverse transfers from four- to two-year institutions come from two states with a large number of community colleges (North Carolina and Illinois), so it is impossible to know exactly how many such transfers there really are. It is evident, however, that a rather large number of students are following this route and very sketchy available evidence suggests that a substantial proportion may have left the senior institution in academic difficulty (Kuznik, et al., 1973). Thus, in accepting reverse transfers, the community college acts somewhat as a safety net. Due to the open door character of these institutions, reverse transfer is less a problem of admissions standards and more a problem of

educational continuity and long-term career guidance.

5. Open Door Transfer. Again, there are no national statistics, but limited state data indicate that some five percent of all transfers may represent movement among two-year institutions. Some of these transfers are likely in non-degree programs. In this instance admission standards seem much less of a problem than does continuity of training.

6. Double Reverse Transfer. There is evidently no basis for estimating how many reverse transfers ultimately apply back to a four-year institution. It seems that reverse transfer is a fairly recent phenomenon, attributable to the very rapid development of open door community colleges. If it is true that students are now discovering this flexible new means of pursuing their education, we may witness substantially larger numbers of transfer applicants to four-year institutions who have previously enrolled at both junior and senior colleges. In the absence of anything beyond local spotty data, one can only speculate, but an interesting problem of transfer standards may be developing. Previously, university students in academic difficulty have had almost no place to go for a second chance. If large numbers now cycle back to open door community colleges and then seek to gain re-admittance at four-year institutions, evaluating their grade manuscripts will pose interesting problems for college registrars. Collective experience and some special local studies may be required to determine how best to judge such student records.

7. Vocational Transfer. Only a small number of community college students in occupational programs apply for transfer to senior institutions, and a large proportion of such applications are rejected (Willingham and Findikyan, 1969). One could seek to articulate vocational programs somewhat

better with baccalaureate programs. But there is already enough difficulty in maintaining the attractiveness and integrity of post-secondary vocational programs, without compromising their objectives in an effort to make transfer to senior institutions easier. There are, however, many legitimate cases of mature students who have done well in such programs and have become interested in baccalaureate work. In most such instances it is probably inefficient and pointless to expect such students to start over as freshmen. Some students now follow so-called upside-down or capstone curricula -- two years of general education in a senior institution, following career course work in a community college (see Kintzer, 1973 for examples). An alternate procedure is to follow the pattern suggested in the case of the nontraditional student and award graduates of occupational programs as much credit as they can earn on college level competency examinations.

Conclusions

In searching for policy recommendations regarding transfer standards, the best place to begin looking is the Knoell-Medsker study of a decade ago and the articulation guidelines that were developed directly from that study. Those findings and those recommendations are, in large part, as apt today as they were when they were written. And there have been complementary suggestions since that time. In this paper, for example, there is emphasis on the fact that there are different ways to approach the problem of transfer standards and that these various mechanisms may be differentially appropriate for various institutions and for different types of transfer students. We have recognized here a variety of issues, but the main problem is that transfer admissions has received so little concerted attention. A statement of the Carnegie Commission (1970) is instructive.

"Full transfer rights should be provided qualified graduates of community colleges by comprehensive state colleges and universities. There should be no artificial ceiling for students with proven academic ability and interest."

This recommendation is quite reasonable, but lacks constructive direction. Even with respect to the particular type of transfer student involved, no one could really disagree with the statement since "full transfer rights" has little meaning when qualified by "proven academic ability and interest." The question is "proven" to whom — to the community college faculty, the state coordinating committee, the senior college academic dean, the chairman of the department in which the student wishes to enroll? The quote illustrates the fact that there is a general reluctance to deal squarely with issues concerning academic standards. It also suggests that there can be no national policy regarding transfer students, even in the case of those moving within articulated systems.

These various considerations suggest that it may be very difficult for a national conference to come to grips effectively with issues that can be approached in several quite different ways, that are manifested primarily in a local or statewide context, and that likely require extensive discussions and hard-won compromises among those people who are directly affected. Under these circumstances, conference guidelines have to be elaborated and backed up by hard work in real situations.

It seems that the most effective work on transfer admissions is going on in individual states and among limited groups of institutions, but most of these local efforts are not organized in a way to serve as national models. I would suggest the need for a variety of exemplary program models. The

development of such models can prove exceedingly useful if they are funded and organized in an operational context so that transfer issues are clearly delineated, background data is systematically gathered, interested parties are thoroughly involved, adequate staff work is available, and outcomes are well documented and disseminated in ways that facilitate other institutions profiting from the work.

There are a number of transfer problems concerning standards as well as other issues that could profit from a systematic effort to model solutions and procedures in an operational context. Some of the more obvious include cooperative efforts to articulate private four-year colleges with public two-year colleges, to define minimum competencies for the lower division in a particular system, to develop guidelines for the evaluation of nontraditional transfer applicants, to define equitable procedures for handling double reverse transfers, and to model routine procedures for disseminating adequate information within a group of colleges concerning performance of transfer students. A useful outcome of this conference would be to lay the groundwork for subsequent development of some such exemplary program models.

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